Can There Be a Bahá'í Poetry?

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THE high station ascribed in Bahá'í scripture to art has led a number of Bahá'í artists to predicate and even to seek Bahá'í forms and artistic conventions. Shoghi Effendi, Guardian of the Bahá'í Faith, made the following comments on this:

> Music, as one of the arts, is a natural cultural development, and the Guardian does not feel that there should be any cultivation of 'Bahá'í Music' any more than we are trying to develop a Bahá'í school of painting or writing. The believers are free to paint, write and compose as their talents may guide them . . . As long as they have music for its own sake it is all right, but they should not consider it *Bahá'í* music.[2]

This is augmented by the following statement:

> As regards producing a book of Bahá'í songs, your understanding that there is no cultural expression which could be called Bahá'í at this time (distinctive music, literature, art, architecture, etc., being the flower of the civilization and not coming at the beginning of a new Revelation), is correct. However, that does not mean that we haven't Bahá'í songs, in other words, songs written by Bahá'ís on Bahá'í subjects.[3]

In considering poetry, the divinest of the arts, it is essential to differentiate between the true poet and the mere versifier. A true poet must have poetic vision, be attuned to great themes and ultimate mysteries, be impelled by his Muse to express his perceptions in poetic form. Such a soul can be born into any age. But the above intimations from the Guardian are unmistakable in their import. Great art is the flower of civilization, and its development in the Bahá'í community, natural and inevitable. We are as yet in the early Springtime of the new World Order when the golden harvest of Bahá'í civilization is but a vision, though an assured one, of the future. Bahá'ís anticipate—it is a hallmark of their faith—a great world civilization in the fullness of time. At present, consonant with the metaphor of natural cycles so ubiquitously used in the Bahá'í Holy Writings, Bahá'ís recognize the barrenness of the times we live in as symptomatic of the season for planting the seeds. Hastening the advent of the oneness of mankind is the surest way to expedite the appearance of a world civilization unparalleled in recorded annals.

Must we then neglect the arts now, as of secondary importance at this stage of our history? I incline to believe such a course would prove unsupportable for Bahá'ís. I believe great enterprises have never proceeded without a sense of poetry on the part of their executors. If empires are built upon valour, upon physical prowess, do they not require exertion of an energetic, even an imaginative will? Much more must this be so for the promotion and establishment of the great religions. Indeed the present activities of the Bahá'ís are saturated with poetry; their past equally, if not more so. Does not Bahá'í Holy Writing—the Word of God we believe—exude poetry? The writings of Shoghi Effendi abound in evocative turns of phrase. Presumably Bahá'ís respond to this beauty. Can it be that they will continue to do so but half consciously? If they do, it will be against the experience of the early years of the Bahá'í movement.

We recall how so many of the Bábí martyrs died with poetry on their lips, be it a couplet or more from Háfiz or verses of their own composition, for many were themselves poets. One of the greatest jewels of the Bábí dispensation was that eloquent, ethereal poetess Táhirih—a woman renowned in the East for her poetry as for her unique stature among women. Bahá'u'lláh, the Author of Arabic and Persian odes which are held to be so exquisitely beautiful as to be untranslatable, liked to have about Him believers who, at His bidding, would recite to Him their poetry. Nabil-i-A'zam, companion of Bahá'u'lláh and respected historian of the early years of the Bábí and Bahá'í Faiths, was an inspired poet. 'Abdu'l-Bahá would have Bahá'í poets recite their works in the Holy Shrines.

If we consider the lovers of 'Abdu'l-Bahá who came from the Occident, we find that Lua Getsinger wrote verses imploring His favour. And thanks to a living Bahá'í poet, Roger White, the prose poetry of Juliet Thompson's diaries has emerged in blank verse that tunes once again the strings of the proverbial Aeolian harp. George Townshend wrote devotional poetry and meditations of high quality. Shall not the Bahá'ís go on? Assuredly, they will continue to be inspired by Bahá'í ideals to write poetry of Bahá'í character.

But it is true as well that what Yeats once called 'The Muses' sterner laws' require of the poet a single-minded devotion which is perhaps at present incompatible with the time required to be spent on the active establishment of the Bahá'í Faith in the world. Moreover, a great poet works within a tradition, and the tradition of great poetry has declined if not virtually died out.

In the modern world the poet is perforce an embittered outsider. By 1850, it was beginning to become apparent that the poet, the sensitive man, felt himself adrift in an alien world. The nineteenth century helped to fix the alienation of the poet in modern times, and also fixed in the minds of men in general an erroneous conception of poets as bizarre, extravagant individuals, invariably at war with received values. The century which had begun with Shelley's claim that poets were the 'unacknowledged legislators of the world' and Carlyle's prediction that Literature would become the new, green branch of religion, ended with Nietzsche declaring that the man of genius was outside of, and must necessarily contemn, established social values. The claim of the poets, if it had grown more shrill and unbalanced, had done so because society had turned away from noble values. The best poets have always dealt with intangibles, with spiritual values. The modern age is grossly materialistic and utilitarian, and above all atheistic; poets, if the evidence of the last century's poetry is to be trusted, cannot do without God. Baudelaire, the arch-defiant among nineteenth century poets in their alienation from society, could not live without believing in supernatural agencies.

We have to remember this situation because no poetry of lasting significance is written independently of civilization and tradition. The poet is individual and subjective, but he is mankind's conscience. Mystically initiated to the divine order of things, he registers man's departure from his nobler nature and his higher ideals. As Schiller said, the poet keeps alive in man aims that are higher than the material. No wonder he has no place in a world given over to the most vulgar technological hunger, the crudest behaviouristic philosophies, and the most soulless social engineering.

The dependence of the poet, in spite of his subjective nature, is very real. He requires not only an audience but a ground-work of shared values with those among whom he dwells. Cut off from this audience, above all cut off from a sustaining adherence to a generally-held social vision, the poet has no mooring and floats adrift in an amorphous, frightening ocean. Matthew Arnold expressed the dilemma of the detached nineteenth century poet:

Still bent to make some port he knows not where,
Still standing for some false, impossible shore.

The Anglo-Saxon poet who composed *Beowulf* never knew such alienation when he sang before the assembled warriors the limited philosophy of valour and heroic death. The poet was in his place. So, one must suppose, was Petrarch in his medieval world and Tasso in his renaissance one. Neither did Shakespeare lack a patron or Milton a livelihood. Goethe too was esteemed at Weimar, and if Byron was a self-exile he still felt a link with the tradition of Pope, and Keats with that of Spenser. Arnold's desolation in isolation presaged the tragic ends of the poets of the *fin de siĕcle,* of whom Yeats wrote:

What portion in the world can the poet have
Who has awakened from the common dream
But dissipation and despair.

There is thus a Church for the poet, as for the composer of music, and an apostolic succession of great ones to whom he feels indebted. And great epochs might consist of a handful of major talents: Marlowe, Jonson, Shakespeare, Webster, Fletcher and Middleton; Goethe, Schiller, Hólderlin, Novalis, Heine; Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn and Brahms. But in a barren age we can scarce name one master, let alone a succession of heirs.

Must the Bahá'í poet be disconsolate then, along with other contemporary poets? Certainly he will make no idle claims, knowing the low cultural standards of his time. But Bahá'ís perhaps may partially escape the sense of vacuum most artists now feel. Bahá'ís live with that, but also maintain a transcendental vision. They are truly the heirs of the Romantic artists who sensed the dawning of the new age around 1800. They know what Richter was speaking of when he proclaimed:

Infinite Providence, Thou wilt cause the day to dawn.

We are aware that the sun has risen, yet still know ourselves to be 'children of the half- light'. Such a vision, though circumscribed, still looks to a future (a glorious one!) and, being transcendental, bears witness to an eternity. Bahá'ís once more have found man's place in endless time, regaining the organic awareness of the succession of epochs which Herder knew of. Moreover, whereas Herder and Fichte had caught a glimpse of God in the ever-unfolding revelation of history, Bahá'ís believe they are party to a knowledge of the Greater Revelation, the key to the whole progression. Bahá'u'lláh, the Greater Revelation, the Manifestation of God for this age, confirmed this knowledge of man's destiny when He said: *All men have been created to carry forward an ever- advancing civilization*.

The transcendentalist sees across time and into eternity; for him the present is part of the whole. A Bahá'í poet may write poetry today knowing that it will be far surpassed by great Bahá'í poets to come, poets supported by a fully-developed philosophy and a world civilization rooted in a religious culture. But he who writes today, writing in humility, may still know he contributed his part to keeping the vision of poetry alive. If what he writes comes from an inspired heart it may still be of human value, and highly regarded by later generations, though its pure poetic value fail to match that of the great practitioners. For the poetic impulse, coming from the soul of men, is of universal interest to all men for all time. It is thus that we may still read today fragments from ancient poets and know that the pulse of poetry was yet alive in those times.

We can therefore best advise the Bahá'í poet of today to hold to the great themes. The eternal themes in poetry pertain to the perpetual themes of life. Above all, the greatest is Love: Love for God, as it is to be found in, for example, Indian literature, and in Sufi poetry; Love for nature, and Love between human beings—how ubiquitous are these themes in the world's poetry.

By keeping poetry alive, we bear witness to the divine impulse within and also enrich society by increasing other men's perception. Poetry is akin to the revealed Word, albeit infinitely lower in rank, being as all else de- pendent upon that; yet the poet also testifies that in the beginning was the Word, that man's speech is also a mark of his divine descent, and poetry the utterance of his deepest nature. Little wonder that poetry is so closely associated with religion, and that the Word of God is often sublime poetry.

Surely, therefore, in the Baha'i community, poetry shall be accorded a very high place of distinction, far above any mean assessment of utility. Even in this era of committees, the province of the poet remains individual and inviolate. There shall be no danger of official demands for realism, or even quasi-romanticism. Plato's antagonism and the Prophet Muhammad's qualified consent that there was some truth in poetry are to be forgotten in the age of man's maturity. The

Bahá'í poet is freed from restraint by virtue of the ideals to which his Faith calls him to aspire. Borne up by the moral vision of the Bahá'í Faith, we will not need to look for an evident didacticism, conscious moralizing or theologizing. There need be no pressure for adherence to the puritanical strain. For it remains true, in Yeats's words '. . . that life is greater than the cause . . . and we artists. . . are the servants not of any cause but of mere naked life, and above all of that life in its nobler forms, where joy and sorrow are one . . .'[4] We do not associate the 'cause' referred to with God's Cause, the Bahá'í Cause, but perhaps only that cause with a small 'c' that men may make out of the Bahá'í Faith. Causes, movements of ideas, have in the past not infrequently become sterile in their adherence to abstractions; that is, ideas not lived and experienced. Ideas and beliefs are not worthy until they become part of life itself. Life in its mere naked form is what human beings actually experience, and poetry addresses itself essentially to personal experience. If the poet is to sing of life in its nobler forms he must have experienced or compassed imaginatively such realities. He must know the joy and suffering that are one, through his own sorrows. It is as though he is articulating the spiritual battles of Everyman. In these matters there can be no abstraction, no dogma. It was Milton who insisted that poets who wished to write heroic poems should first make of their lives heroic poems. Bahá'ís, following the advice of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, do not merely recite verses but strive to make their lives beautiful prayers. Poets must express what they believe not in theory but in the way they themselves, and others, have actually lived such belief.

Belief is in continual need of revitalization through the influx of spiritual sensibility and the infusion of real experience touched by imagination. The poet is one who can advance this aim, alongside the efforts of others, and thus we reiterate his importance to the Bahá'í community. For fully accepted and approved, in this role he does become servant of the cause, which is life itself, the higher life that is to be, which man must have more abundantly.

Profane imagery has been handled by the greatest poets, including Háfiz and Goethe; it has influenced the sacred, as in the case of the medieval lyric. The two English Puritan poets, Spenser and Milton, the most serious of poets both, were alive to the sensuous. Hatred of the world is not the poet's way; he must have water and clay as well as nightingales and roses. The Qur'anic paradise and the beloved's hair are natural images that the most Sacred of Voices have not disdained to use.

At present then, the Bahá'í who writes poetry may find solace in the golden mines which have been worked by the great poets of the past. Like most literate poets he will read widely. His particular advantage is the inspiration of the themes, symbols and images to be found in the tradition of his Faith. He has both a tradition which is yet a new one, and a vision which is faced to the future. He may recall the potent influence of religion on previous literatures. In Hebrew literature poetry and religious inspiration are synonymous; the Indian languages have contributed a vital and varied literature to Hindu culture; and perhaps the most powerful example of religion wedded to literature is Islám and Arabic, which in turn fertilized the fields of Persian, Turkish and Urdu literature.

These thoughts only underline the inevitability of an unimaginably resplendent range of literature in the mature Bahá'í civilization. What an inheritance does the Bahá'í poet share! We may be present at the beginning, but the prospect is vast. Here is not the place to prophesy as to the possible images future poets will invoke, poets who have immersed themselves in the ocean of the Bahá'í Writings. But lest it seem that I am content only with generalization, I would like to quote briefly from a living Bahá'í poet whose work possesses, in my estimation, a distinctive character.

Roger White's poetry contains, as far as I can tell, many echoes from the tradition of English literature. He moves from the meditative, sometimes self-dissecting introspection of the seventeenth century Metaphysicals, through the light-hearted *jeux d'esprits* of the eighteenth, to the apparent disenchantment of the modern mind.

We have a modern echo of John Donne:

Come, let me fete you, beloved foe,
for I tire of this old-born war.

In stark contrast, we find the completely secular voice of the japing eighteenth century poet ostensibly berating a gourmand mistress:

My deeper need you blithely slight,
Love—not food—my appetite.

And yet another volte-face reveals the sceptical conscience of the modern:

When you heard that God had died, you wondered
whether it was from sheer boredom—
all that joyless music and our impudent prayers.

I find in Roger White's variety of styles, moods and themes the unity of a distinctive poetic mind. His use of secular image and idiom is unabashed and unrepentant:

Named by her past suitors' Akká, Ptolemais, St. Jean d'Acre,
she is no beauty, this aged courtesan, meanly rouged by sun.

Why did you do it, Keith?
And you a looker.

Freddie, you walked in
with eyes as open as your heart,
knew it to be the deal beyond compromise;
survived the imagery
accommodated to nightingales and roses.

Here is the use of colloquial phrase and the profane conceit, but not merely for effect. We sense there is an ulterior purpose behind the use of bawdy image, accusatory line and worldly wit. This sense of controlling wisdom behind the open technical facility is in fact the secret to the appreciation of Roger White's intention as poet. His is a deeply human eye; hiding beneath the layers of burlesque and modernist world-weariness is a sorrowful and joyous delicacy of feeling. The heart of the quintessential pioneer—the grey-haired Bahá'í lady inveigling an innocent 'contact' into her Faith through her kindness and conviction—is penetrated. She would:

> . . . have shielded the hapless
> of Nagasaki, Warsaw, Buchenwald,
> with her own body, if she could.
> Long ago she wept and worked for causes not then named.

But if he can celebrate the unknown Bahá'í, he can also give a jolting insight into the predicament of known saints. The much-loved Fujita, renowned Japanese Bahá'í, loving and devoted servant of 'Abdu'l-Bahá, emerges as a vulnerable, isolated man as opposed to the walking institution or sentimental relic:

> Acquitted of triviality by a pain and loneliness that might instruct us,
> rescued a halo's-breadth from isolating sainthood by an exonerating intolerance and his need for us,
> but still a holy man.

That these lines suggest so much about ourselves as well as Fujita, as well as the poet's seeing, sensitive eye, is perhaps a mark of Roger White's range. On the surface eschewing didacticism like a plague, this poetry has 'much to say' because it requires the reader to look into himself. Do we confine to cruel isolation those we ostensibly canonize as living saints? Roger White sees the predicament of the real man but his poet's lens also captures in a flash something of his subject's character:

> mikado of mirth,
> the Servant's servant.

This is real poetry then. It is not accommodating; it is often sardonic, questioning, not easily satisfied. But it carries a note of wisdom and acceptance too. We see a practising poet writing, not as a single-minded poet-laureate for the Bahá'í Cause, but a sensitized human being.

But at a more obvious 'Bahá'í' level, Roger White's poetry suggests further points of departure. The heroes, heroines and history of the Bahá'í Faith are not invoked simplistically or meretriciously, nor do quotations from Scripture do the poet's work for him. When there is a quotation (he loves to borrow Shoghi Effendi's or the Universal House of Justice's epithets to crown remembered Bahá'í figures) it is to build an aura of pageant:

> Brilliant Keith! immortal Lua! steadfast Thornton!
> courageous Marion! incomparable Martha! constant Juliet!

> What is the purpose in this?
> I fashion a paean; to vanquish dread, invoke the victors.

It is an answer, then, to personal need, as well as to celebrate past souls and the spirit that moved them. Roger White's poetry, while retaining the poet's individuality, yet leads us to hope for a Bahá'í tradition of poetry.

Notes

1. [footnote #1 repeated from top of first page in this PDF] This essay appears here in its original form. At the request of the Canadian Association for Studies on the Baha'i Faith it was subsequently revised for inclusion in vol. 7 of *Baha'i Studies.* See also 'The Heroic Soul and the Ordinary Self—a Study in the Religious Poetry of Roger White,' by Geoffrey Nash.
2. The Universal House of Justice, compilation 'Bahá'í Writings on Music', Bahá'í Publishing Trust, Oakham, England, p. II.

3 ibid.

4. W. B. Yeats, *Essays and Introductions,* New York, 1961 p. 260.